

“Article of Faith: Communion”
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Luke 22: 14 – 23

He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this

1st Corinthians 11:23 – 33

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

Sara Miles was raised as an atheist. Her grandparents, on both sides of her family, had been missionaries abroad and radicals at home. Her parents, however, did not experience

faith in the same way, and so, raised their children quite differently. In her book, “Take This Bread,” Sara describes it this way¹:

Those rituals—the hymns, the piety, the claustrophobic niceness...—had ruled my mother’s childhood. She could not swallow it. Instead, she and my father taught us how good it tasted to escape convention... My parents never went to church—not on Easter, not at Christmas—and didn’t have friends who did; our Sundays were for reading the New York Times, listening to Vivaldi on the record player, eating artichokes and mussels...

And it seemed to be enough. Until. Until Sara Miles was in her 40s, living in San Francisco. And then, in her words, this is what happened²:

Early one winter morning, I walked into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. I had no earthly reason to be there. I'd never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian.... But on other long walks I'd passed the beautiful wooden building, with its shingled steeples and plain windows, and this time I went in, on an impulse, with no more than a reporter's habitual curiosity.

The rotunda was flooded with slanted morning light. A table in the center of the open, empty space was ringed high above by a huge neo-Byzantine mural...; outside, in the back, water trickled from a huge slab of rock set against the hillside....I walked in, took a chair and tried not to catch anyone's eye....

We sat down and stood up, sang and sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang, and it was all pretty peaceful and sort of interesting. "Jesus invites everyone to his table," the woman announced, and we started moving up in a stately dance to the table in the rotunda. It had some dishes on it, and a pottery goblet.

And then we gathered around that table. And there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying, "the body of Christ," and handing me the goblet of sweet wine saying "the blood of Christ," and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

It was Sara Miles’ first Communion. She didn’t know what the table was. She didn’t know what the words meant. She hadn’t read the Bible. But that moment changed her life. She took part in a feast. She received Communion.

In the Presbyterian tradition, Communion is one of the big two. One of two sacraments, the most sacred practices in the life of faith, outward and visible signs of God’s inward and invisible grace. Sacraments because they are things Jesus did. Things Jesus told us to do.

¹ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: The Spiritual Memoir of a twenty-first-century Christian*, New York: Ballantine, 2007, pages 8-9.

² Miles, pages 57-58

With Baptism, it is a once-in-a-lifetime-kind-of-thing. You are baptized once. One God. One Faith. One Baptism. Baptized into the community, recognizing the ever-present love of God.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing. It's not even an annual kind of thing. It is intended to be a-frequent-kind-of-thing. John Calvin thought that Holy Communion should be celebrated each time the Word of God was, is, read and proclaimed. Each time we gather for worship and consider God's call and claim upon our lives. That was a little too much for the people of Calvin's time, and he lost that argument.

But he did win the requirement that communion be celebrated at least quarterly, and today, we do more than that.³

Calvin believed in the frequency of communion not because he wanted to increase the amount of time people spent in church, he believed in the significance of what happens in this sacrament. The importance of moments when we remember the life Christ lived for us. When we are united with God in a very particular way. These things happen, we believe, not because of any chemical or physical change in the bread and juice, the symbols in this remembrance, but because of the power of God that lifts us into Communion, a mystical time when we are one with God. In Communion with God.

It is a significant thing, and we are advised to accept God's invitation to Communion by preparing for it. With prayer. Openness to God. Making amends. Healing divisions. For centuries churches even used tokens, tokens which granted admission to the table, given to those who had prepared to receive.

Prepared, which is, I believe, different from being ready. Are any of us ever truly ready? Do any of us ever fully understand? From the child who asks for seconds to the elderly woman who cannot remember. It is another of God's gifts, working in ways we do not expect and

³ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book IV, chapter 17, section. 44.

<http://www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes/>

The Lord's Supper should be celebrated frequently

What we have hitherto said of the sacrament, abundantly shows that it was not instituted to be received once a year, and that perfunctorily, (as is now commonly the custom;) but that all Christians might have it in frequent use, and frequently call to mind the sufferings of Christ, thereby sustaining and confirming their faith: stirring themselves up to sing the praises of God, and proclaim his goodness; cherishing and testifying towards each other that mutual charity, the bond of which they see in the unity of the body of Christ. As often as we communicate in the symbol of our Savior's body, as if a pledge were given and received, we mutually bind ourselves to all the offices of love, that none of us may do anything to offend his brother, or omit anything by which he can assist him when necessity demands, and opportunity occurs.

That such was the practice of the Apostolic Church, we are informed by Luke in the Acts, when he says that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers," (Acts 2: 42.) Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms. We may gather from Paul that this was the order observed by the Corinthians, and it is certain that this was the practice many ages after.

cannot fully understand. God continues to be open to people who struggle with how to receive such an amazing gift.

Such an amazing gift- it is more than a meal. It is a feast. A sign of God's abundance. That we don't need to fear scarcity, we are called, instead to rest in God's abundance that we re-enact each time we gather at the table.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper isn't just about a moment when we are united with God, it is about **everything** that happens when we open ourselves to the generosity and power of the one who is the source and sustainability of all that we know and see and are.

The Sacraments aren't just about what we do in here. They are the things that lead us to live the way that we live out there.

Sara Miles writes that after she began to worship each week at St. Gregory's she began to see life in a new way. To begin to understand that church wasn't about Sunday mornings, it was about how Sunday mornings led to living differently in the Monday - Saturdays⁴:

“I had loved my grandparents but been incurious about their faith: Like wearing ironed white shirts or reusing waxed paper to wrap sandwiches, religion just seemed another thing that old people did. So even when one grandmother marched with the NAACP for civil rights, then another got arrested protesting at a military base, I didn't connect their surprising activism with the obscure rituals they practiced on Sundays.

As Sara made the connections between faith and action, she began to search for her own place of activism. She realized that feeding people was something she could do. She started working on the idea of a food pantry. This is the letter she wrote to her church to ask for their blessing and help⁵:

The first time I came to the table at St. Gregory's, I was a hungry stranger. Each week since then, I've shown up—undeserving and needy—and each week, someone's hands have broken bread and brought me into Communion. Because of how I've been welcomed and fed in the Eucharist, I see starting a food pantry at church not as an act of 'outreach' but one of gratitude. To feed others means acknowledging our own hunger and at the same time acknowledging the amazing abundance we're fed with by God. At St. Gregory's, we do it now on Sundays, standing in a circle with the saints dancing bright above us. I believe we can do it one more time each week—gathered around the Table under those same icons, handing plastic bags full of macaroni and peanut butter to strangers, in remembrance of him.”¹¹⁶

That was some 18 years ago. St. Gregory's started their food pantry, and it's still going. The food pantry they host as well as the 20 others they have helped to start. They provide food

⁴ Miles, page 8

⁵ Miles, page 116.

for up to 500 families each Friday. No forms. No ID. No exemptions. And the food is right around the table where on Sunday, they share, remember, and are in Communion with God who makes it all possible. It's not separate from their worship on Sundays, it is an extension of it.

It was not easy. It was not without turmoil, question, struggle and conflict, personal and congregational. But it was all within the context of faith.

As people of faith, we believe that communion is more than a meal. It is a Feast. The glorious abundance that comes, not from some miraculous multiplication, but the miracles which happen when faithful people listen to God and share, help, encourage, risk, and open themselves to things they didn't believe were possible. It is not a meal, it is a feast.

A feast where we feed and a feast where we are fed.

We believe in the feast. The abundance of God, and the amazing things that can happen when people gather together, eat bread, drink juice, and accept God's invitation to a new life.

In September and October, November and December, we will be celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper here in this place. We will be invited into communion with God. What will it be like, the bread, the juice, the prayers, the community gathered? How will it be a feast? How will we be fed? How will we feed others? It is a story which is still unfolding, and why communion is an article of faith. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.